

Learning to play Mighty Mo

Operating the majestic Fox Theatre organ is easy – if you're an octopus.

By Bo Emerson
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The Fox Theatre's Möller pipe organ is the most famous musical instrument in Atlanta and one of the best known theatrical organs in the country.

When Ken Double, the Fox's organist (along with Rick McGee) invited me to take a lesson on Mighty Mo, it was an offer I couldn't refuse.

I felt obliged to remind Ken that I'm a trumpet player, not an organist, and warned him not to expect any E. Power Biggs. Ken was encouraging.

His optimism might have been colored by the fact that I've had a chance to see parts of the Mighty Mo that few civilians have examined.

If you sit in the Fox Theatre and look high on the walls to stage left and stage right you see triple-arched openings covered with gilded grates. They look like box seats but are actually the pipe chambers.

In 2008, I climbed up 30 feet of vertical ladders through locked trap doors into the Chambers A and B (stage right), led by Fox president and CEO Allan Vella and the late Joseph "Phantom of the Fox" Patten. We were there to tinker with some of the ancient (and very valuable) Ludwig drums that are among the actual physical devices that can be played from the driver's seat of this remarkable instrument.

Then, earlier this year, I had a chance to watch while workmen detached the Mighty Mo's gaudy console from its umbilical cord of 4,000 wires, and dollied it into a truck to be whisked off to the A.E. Schlueter Pipe Organ Company in Lithonia.

After 90 years of service, the console needed care. While it undergoes a year-long renovation, organists at the Fox will perform on a mirror-image console, built at Schlueter to duplicate the Möller console, right down to its horseshoe curve and its stack of keyboards.

At the Schlueter shop, I had a chance to peer inside the guts of the original and see welds and repairs done by Patten, accompanied by his own handwriting. It's a rat's nest of wires.

At the Fox, sitting in the driver's seat of the stand-in console, with its four ranks of keyboards, 376 tabs, and 24 pre-set pistons,



AJC reporter Bo Emerson gets a lesson at the Fox Theatre's Mighty Möller pipe organ from Fox organist Ken Double. The console for the organ is undergoing a year-long renovation. TYSON HORNE/TYSON.HORNE@AJC.COM PHOTOS



The keyboard of Mighty Mo (the organ is made by Möller, hence the nickname) at the Fox Theatre. Mo is undergoing a renovation that will deal with many of the problems associated with being a complex 90-year-old.

it was just as bewildering, like being handed the stick in the cockpit of a 747.

Just to choose one example, I found out that if you engage the pneumatically-controlled drums, you play the snare drum and high-hat with the bass pedals, which means you'd better be metro-nomic and you can't lay out.

"Why is my foot so slow?" I asked Double.

"Well, partly because that signal has to go about a hundred yards, from here," he pointed at the console, "to there," pointing at

Chamber A, above the exit doors.

Double, 67, has worked for decades as a sports broadcaster, and was the voice of the Atlanta Knights minor league hockey team in 1994, the year the team won the Turner Cup. Double and McGee perform on the Mighty Mo at least 150 nights a year, entertaining audiences before Broadway shows and at singalongs during summer movie festivals.

My lesson took place on the stand-in console, the one that Double sometimes calls "Faux Mo." It's a beautiful work of art,

crafted to fit the exact dimensions of the real thing, though some woodworking details – dental molding, scrollery, etc. – were created with a trompe-l'oeil paint job by art conservator Nancy S. Livengood, rather than with expensive carpentry.

In the end, the Faux Mo console will be yanked off the elevator that lifts Double out of the orchestra pit, and the rightful console, the Real Mo, will be returned, in all its rebuilt glory, but with some of the replacement's internal organs transplanted into it, including the four keyboards and the tabs.

None of this mattered to a theatrical organ neophyte such as myself. I just wanted to feel the rush. I wanted to tab in the 32-foot diaphone that can actually make the building shake.

In the meantime I was trying, with Double's help, to play "Somewhere My Love," controlling the volume with my right foot, playing the bassline (and the drums) with my left foot, playing the "oom-pa-pa" accompaniment while Double added the melody, and, in the meantime, using the pistons to activate a different set of pipes, creating a change in timbre and volume for the "big finish."

I nailed it, sort of.

"Look at that!" said Double. "We made a Mighty Mo theater

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organist out of Bo Emerson!"

Perhaps not. My left hand was not stellar. But Double

was enthused about the improvements to the stand-in console, which now uses a microprocessor and an Ethernet-style cable instead of that bundle of wires. "It's quicker, and it's cleaner,

and it's more responsive," said Double. "And when Old Mo comes back, it will be quicker too."

I had a chance to try "Green Onions." Then it was time to go.